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Senator Heitkamp's First Bill:
The Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children

Senator Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) introduced her first bill in the Senate to create a Commission on Native Children and begin a long overdue national conversation about the state of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children. The Commission will examine the unique challenges Native children face and make recommendations on how to improve the current system by building on the strengths of Native communities. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) helped introduce the bill.

Background

The federal government has a trust responsibility to provide for the education, health, and safety of Native children, yet Native children are the most at-risk population in the country facing significant disparities in these areas. Tribal governments face numerous obstacles in responding to the needs of Native children. Existing program rules and the volume of resources required to access current grant opportunities stymie efforts of tribes to tackle these issues. At the same time, federal agencies lack clear guidance about the direction that should be taken to best address the needs of Native children in order to fulfill our trust responsibility to tribal nations.

Senator Heitkamp believes Native children have never been given their due voice. Indeed, the statistics demonstrate this country is failing Native children. The Center for Native Youth reports:

- Native children have the third highest rate of victimization. In 2009, 7,335 Native children were victims of child maltreatment.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death – 2.5 times the national rate – among Native children ages 15 to 24 years old.
- The national graduation rate for Native high school students hovers around 50% compared to more than 75% for white students.
- Only 13.3% of Native children have obtained undergraduate degrees, compared to 24.4% of the general population.
- Native children are overrepresented in foster care – at more than 2.1 times the general population – and two to four times the expected level are awaiting adoption.
- While the U.S. child mortality rate for non-Native children ages 1 to 14 has decreased by 9% since 2000, it has increased 15 percent for Native children.

About the Bill

The bipartisan bill creates a Commission on Native Children, which will conduct a comprehensive study on the programs, grants, and supports available for Native children, both at government agencies and on the ground in Native communities. The goal is to develop a sustainable system that delivers wrap-around services to Native children.

The 11 member Commission will have expertise in areas of juvenile justice, social work, education, and mental and physical health. A bipartisan group including the President, Majority and Minority Leaders in the Senate, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Minority Leader in the House of Representatives will appoint members to the Commission. Recognizing the need to include children in the conversation, the bill establishes a Native Children Subcommittee comprised of one young person from each Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) service area and one Native Hawaiian. The Native Children Subcommittee will provide advice to the Commission members and offer insight to help guide the Commission's work.

Three years after the date the Commission is fully appointed and fully funded, the Commission will issue a report with its recommendations on how to achieve:

- **Better Use of Existing Resources** – The Commission will identify ways to streamline current federal, state, and local programs to be more effective and give tribes greater flexibility to devise programs for their communities in the spirit of self-determination and allow government agencies to redirect resources to the areas of most need.
- **Increase Coordination** – The Commission will seek to improve coordination of existing programs benefitting Native children. The federal government houses programs across numerous different agencies, yet these programs too often do not work together.
- **Measurable Outcomes** – The Commission will recommend measures to determine the well-being of Native children, and use these measurements to propose short-term, mid-term, and long-term national policy goals.
- **Stronger Data** – The Commission will seek to develop better data collection methods. Too often Native children are left out of the conversation because existing data collection, reporting, and analysis practices exclude them.
- **Stronger Private Sector Partnerships** – The Commission will seek to identify obstacles to public-private partnerships in Native communities.
- **Implementation of Best Practices** – The Commission will identify and highlight successful models that can be adopted in Native communities.

The Commission will be funded through unexpended funds from the Department of Justice, Department of the Interior, and Department of Health and Human Services.

The National Congress of American Indians, the National Indian Education Association, and the Great Plains Tribal Chairman's Association have endorsed the bill.

The Commission is named in honor of Alyce Spotted Bear, former tribal chairwoman of the Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara Nation in North Dakota -- a passionate advocate for Native children and a recognized leader in education -- and Walter Soboleff, Alaska Native Elder and statesman from the Tlingit tribe in Alaska.